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Influence of expert advice on expansion goals of small businesses in rural Sweden *. (Global Perspective).
Larsson, Ewa; Hedelin, Lisbeth; Garling, Tommy
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TEXT:

A solution to the problem of rural regions experiencing decreasing populations and shortage of employment opportunities may be to stimulate the expansion of existing small businesses. Managers of small businesses are instrumental in this process. Knowledge of factors that make them expand their businesses therefore is essential for developing regional economic-growth policy. Attesting to this, Besser (1999) found that small business managers' high levels of commitment, leadership, and support for the community are important.

We empirically test the hypothesis that adoption of expansion goals by small business managers is influenced by expert advice. A rural region on the west coast of Sweden located between two metropolitan areas is examined. The region, in which small businesses dominate, has a population of about 12,000 that is declining steadily. Expanding these businesses would be a way of stimulating economic growth.

Many factors are likely to determine the success of a small business, such as available work force, business ideas, capital structure, potential markets, and infrastructure. However, the influence of such factors is filtered in general through the managers' perceptions. Such perceptions are likely to be affected by a host of factors including cognitive, motivational, and social/psychological. We focus here on the motivational factor of goal setting. One of the most influential approaches to understanding human motivation, particularly in work settings, is the theory of goal setting (Locke and Latham 1990). Yet it may be noted that other perspectives may be more appropriate to account for striving toward or maintaining goals that are established already (for instance, Austin and Vancouver 1996; Carver and Scheier 1998).

Appropriate goals however are not sufficient, as some degree of knowledge also is required for successful performance (Locke 2000). We assume that the higher aspiration level entailed by expansion goals for a business in combination with adequate knowledge leads to better-performance measured as profit and turnover rates. Some research supports this contention. For instance, Baum et al. (2001) found a direct effect of aspiration levels on later success. In recent years, there has been a surge of interest in knowledge management within organizations. A widespread belief exists in the potential for organizations to generate competitive advantages on the basis of their knowledge assets. Harvey and Denton (1999) identified several reasons for this, including the greater demands being placed on businesses by customers and the intensely competitive nature of global business.

Locke et al. (1981) report that 99 of 110 studies found that specific or difficult goals lead to better work performance than medium, easy, do-your-best, or no goals. In this vein, Frese et al. (2000) found that the most successful strategy by small businesses is to combine goals and multidirectional plans, making the manager actively search for opportunities. Furthermore, Orser et al. (2000) showed that the use of business plans was correlated highly with firm size and propensity to increase revenues.

By expansion goals we mean willingness to enlarge the firm by finding new markets. Defensive goals, the opposite, are characterized by satisfaction with status quo. In our survey, respondents were asked to

indicate whether they pursue a number of specified goals assumed to define a continuum from expansion goals to defensive goals. Why do some small business managers adopt expansion goals for their businesses whereas others do not? Although many personal characteristics including aspirations are important, we focus on the role of expert advice. We hypothesize that the choice of an expert adviser is an essential determinant of adopting expansion goals. Harvey and Fischer (1997) found that advice tends to give novice decision-makers an opportunity to share responsibility. Advice also may increase confidence and risk taking. This may apply to all types of advisers, but perhaps only expert advisers are able to motivate managers to pursue expansion goals. Their experience and vision may make them different in this respect from other advisers. Their superior knowledge also makes them more trustworthy. Chrisman (1999) suggested that outsider assistance positively influences the likelihood that entrepreneurs will start a business and that entrepreneurs who draw upon others for knowledge have a startup advantage over entrepreneurs who do not.

We acknowledge that some small business managers may not want to seek expert advice, perhaps since they are satisfied with their business performance. In a cross-sectional study we cannot rule out however the reverse direction of this influence--that is, that managers with expansion goals choose expert advice rather than the reverse. Intervention studies with before-and-after measurements are needed to infer the causal direction. Yet establishing a correlation is at this stage important.

From our survey data we know that advisers include board members, employees, accountants, colleagues, family, and friends. We define as expert advisers those who are board members, accountants, and colleagues. Some managers of small firms are very likely to have many advisers. The number of advisers also may be an important determinant, although we believe that the frequency of contacting expert advisers is the most crucial one. Thus, we categorize managers in two groups: those who seek expert advice and those who do not.

Obviously, different advisers may be sought depending on the type of need for advice. These types of needs are related to investment, finance, staff, product development, marketing, and information and communication technology (ICT). We do not venture to assume that any of these types are more important but examine in turn each with respect to the correlation with expansion goals.

The main aim of the present study is thus to examine if expert advice is related to the degree to which managers of small firms state that they have expansion goals. We also include a measure of turnover rates. Turnover rate is an **indicator of performance** or activity of a specific **event**. It is defined as the **business's** annual total sales revenues. Although not a measure of profit, it reflects the societal value of the business. Our focus relates to the improvement for rural regions from stimulating the growth of small businesses. Higher turnover rates indicate a growing flow of money transactions as well as increased job opportunities.

Method

Respondents and Procedure

The targeted population consisted of 816 firms located in Tanum, Sweden. A questionnaire with a postage-paid return envelope was sent to each firm with a request that the top manager/owner respond. Usable questionnaires were obtained from 223 (27.3 percent) respondents, who were managers of agriculture (89 or 39.9 percent), production (75 or 33.6 percent), or service/culture (59 or 26.5 percent) businesses. Agriculture businesses included farming, foresting, and fishing; production businesses included production of goods, construction, retails, repairs, and rentals; and service/culture businesses included hotels, restaurants, local food cooking, transportation services, health care/social services, painters/actors, financing, and ICT or education. Respondent descriptives are provided in Table 1. Refusals, unreliability of the mail service, ownership of more than one firm, and working abroad during the survey period were reasons for firms dropping out of the sample.

Questionnaire

The questionnaire consisted of several modules. The data analyses are limited to answers to questions concerning goals, advisers in different

decision domains, and social demographics.

Each respondent checked a list of goals with respect to whether or not they pursued these goals. The goals included the following nine (ordered from more to less expansion goals): (1) The firm should grow (growth); (2) The revenue should increase my personal wealth (personal wealth); (3) I hope to be able to hire more staff (employing staff); (4) I want to sell in export markets (exporting); (5) It is sufficient that the firm supports a full-time income (full-time income); (6) I want to work close to home (close to home); (7) I want to sell the firm after retirement (selling after retirement); (8) I want to have more spare time (spare time); and (9) I want to grow vegetables, pick berries, and fish for my own needs (self-housekeeping).

The respondents were asked to indicate from whom they take advice. They could check either none or one or more of the following: board member, accountant, employee, colleague, family member, or friend in each of the decision domains of investment, financing, staff employment, product development, ICT, and marketing.

The social demographic questions included gender, age, education, years of experience, owner/not owner of the firm (1), started/did not start the firm, runs the business full time or part time, number of employees, and business area.

The respondents finally were asked to report the business's turnover rate during the last year. They checked one of six levels: less than SEK100,000; SEK100,001-500,000; SEK500,001- 1,000,000; SEK1,000,001-10,000,000; SEK10,000,001-50,000,000; and more than SEK50,000,001 (1 Swedish Krona (SEK) is approximately 0.15 \$US).

Results

A measure of expansion goals first was constructed on the basis of the goals that the respondents checked. Reliability analyses using Cronbach's alpha indicated that two of the goals, personal wealth (15.2 percent) and selling after retirement (42.2 percent), should not be retained since their reliability was not acceptable. A mean first was calculated across three of the expansion goals, growth, employing staff, and exporting. The distribution of the scores however was skewed extremely (42.6, 29.6, and 5.8 percent, respectively). Instead, a mean also was calculated across four of the defensive goals, full-time income (43.9 percent), close to home (62.3 percent), spare time (42.6 percent), and self-housekeeping (24.7 percent), so that the difference between the means of the expansion and defensive goals could be used as an index. Cronbach's alpha was 0.43. The majority (65 percent) of the respondents had defensive goals (that is, a negative value).

In a first ordinary least-square (OLS) multiple regression analysis, the dependent variable was the expansion-defensive goal index. Whether or not expert advisers were consulted in the different decision domains was the primary independent variable. Several other variables also were included in order to control for confounding effects. As can be seen in Table 2, 23 percent of the variance in the expansion-defensive goal index was explained. The index was related positively to the frequency of seeking staff and marketing expert advice, respectively. However, there was a negative relationship with seeking financial expert advice. The number of employees also had a positive relationship, while the number of years of experience had a negative relationship.

In a second OLS multiple regression analysis, the dependent variable was the turnover rate scaled from 1 to 6 (less than SEK 100,000; SEK 100,001-500,000; SEK 500,001-1,000,000; SEK 1,000,001-10,000,000; SEK 10,000,001-50,000,000; and more than SEK 50,000,001). The main independent variable was the expansion-defensive goal index. Sixty-three percent of the variance in turnover rate was accounted for. A mediational analysis was performed by including as additional independent variables frequency of expert advice in the different domains. If expansion goals mediate the effect on turnover rates, these variables were expected to be correlated with the dependent variable but to have nonsignificant regression coefficients. Additional independent variables were included to control for confounding. As Table 3 shows, expansion goals were correlated significantly with turnover rates, but the regression coefficient also was significant. All adviser variables furthermore were correlated

significantly with turnover rate, but only one of them, staff adviser, yielded a significant regression coefficient. As in the former analysis, number of employees showed a positive relationship as did that the firm was run full time. The contrast production versus service/culture businesses furthermore was significant. The production businesses had higher turnover rates ($M = 3.41$, $SD = 1.30$) than the service/culture businesses ($M = 2.66$, $SD = 1.24$).

Discussion

The empirical results show that seeking expert advice on staff and marketing issues has an independent effect on small business managers' pursue of expansion goals such as growth, employing staff, and exporting their products! services. In addition, both having expansion goals and seeking expert advice influenced reported turnover rates. However, the effect of expert advice on turnover rates appeared to be direct rather than to be mediated by having expansion goals. Although turnover rate is a crude measure of business success, that it was affected by both having expansion goals and expert advice or knowledge is consistent with previous research (Locke 2000).

A drawback in this study appears to be the low reliability of the index of expansion goals. More refined measures (Austin and Vancouver 1996) could be developed. Yet the low reliability was not unexpected since our aim was to develop a measure that represents the multiple goals of small business managers rather than merely including replicates. The fact that the index correlated with the other measures attests that it is satisfactory.

A majority of the managers did not have expansion goals for their businesses. This should not, however, be viewed as a sign of fear to expand. It may be a way of defending values already attained. If the business provides a sufficient income to support the manager/owner and his or her family, why bother to expand? Many of the businesses in the region do not have any nonfamily employees, pertaining in fact to 55.2 percent of the firms in the sample. To the manager/owner, the family serves not only as the group of advisers but also as an integrated part of the daily life of the business.

The results suggest that lack of contacts with outside expert advisers is an obstacle to the expansion of small businesses in the region and consequently to regional economic growth. Does the social environment prevent small firms from expanding and providing others with job opportunities? If so, would the effort of building up local networks among small business managers improve such a situation? Significant psychological factors should be emphasized due to its apparent impact; one avenue to this is the proper understanding of small business managers' goals. Managers may be satisfied with the business they run, although satisfaction with the status quo does not fit into a regional economic-growth policy. However, there also may be cases where lack of incentives and knowledge are reasons why a small business has not expanded. Regional economic-growth policy must identify and may focus on these cases. Such policy may want to facilitate expert advice to motivate the small business managers to change their goals in a more expansive direction.

Table 1

Descriptives for Three Samples of Managers of Small Businesses

	Agriculture (n = 89) (%)		Production (n = 75) (%)		Service/Culture (n = 59) (%)	
Sex (Men)	93.2		81.3		69.5	
Education						
High School	7.0		7.0		2.0	
University	32.6		40.0		54.2	
Runs Firm Full Time	64.0		88.0		81.4	
Started Business	56.2		72.0		86.4	
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
Age (Years)	52.5	12.2	47.1	10.1	47.9	10.5

Experience (Years)	34.3	15.3	21.7	12.8	19.4	11.8
Number of Employees	0.27	0.60	1.08	1.17	0.83	1.00

Table 2

Means, SDs, Simple Correlations (r), Standardized Regression Coefficients (beta), and t-statistics from Regression Analysis Having the Index of Expansion Goal as Dependent Variable (n = 223)

	M	SD	R	Beta	t
Expansion Goal	-0.17	0.42			
Staff Adviser					
0.19 0.40 .25 *** 0.21 2.94					
Product Development Adviser	0.32	0.47	.13 *	0.05	.67
ICT Adviser	0.19	0.40	.11 *	0.05	.69
Marketing Adviser	0.30	0.46	.05	0.18	2.20
Investment Adviser	0.45	0.50	.16 *	0.06	.75
Finance Adviser	0.43	0.50	.09	-0.21	2.60
Agriculture versus Other Business	0.20	1.47	-.27 ***	-0.13	-1.68
Production versus Service/Culture Business	0.07	0.77	.06	0.00	.03
Gender (Men 1, Women 0)	1.17	0.38	-.03	-0.06	-.91
Age (Years)	49.4	11.3	-.07	0.09	1.08
Education (University 1, other 0)	0.41	0.49	.07	-0.03	-.44
Experience (Years)	26.1	15.1	-.23 ***	-0.19	-2.19
Runs Firm Full Time	0.77	0.42	.12 *	0.01	.21
Started Business	0.70	0.46	-.06	-0.05	-.81
Number of Employees	0.69	0.99	.43 ***	0.37	5.26

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Expansion Goal	
Staff Adviser	.004
Product Development Adviser	.51
ICT Adviser	.49
Marketing Adviser	.03
Investment Adviser	.48
Finance Adviser	.01
Agriculture versus Other Business	.09
Production versus Service/Culture Business	.98
Gender (Men 1, Women 0)	.36
Age (Years)	.28
Education (University 1, other 0)	.66
Experience (Years)	.03
Runs Firm Full Time	.83
Started Business	.42
Number of Employees	.001

Adj (R.sup.2) = .23, F(15, 222) = 5.41, p < .001

* p < .05

*** p < .001

Table 3

Means, SDs, Simple Correlations (r), Standardized Regression Coefficients (beta), and t-Statistics from Regression Analysis Having Reported Turnover Rate as Dependent Variable (n = 223)

	M	SD	R	Beta	t
Turnover Rate	2.68	1.33			
Expansion Goal	-0.17	0.42	.43 ***	0.11	2.36
Investment Adviser	0.				
45 0.50 .35 *** 0.08 1.38					
Finance Adviser	0.43	0.50	.36 ***	0.02	.36
Staff Adviser	0.19	0.40	.33 ***	0.11	2.12
Prodcut Development Adviser	0.32	0.47	.17 ***	-0.01	-.22
ICT Advisor	0.19	0.40	.17 **	-0.02	-.41
Marketing Advisor	0.30	0.46	.18 **	-0.05	-.91
Agriculture versus Other Business	0.20	1.47	-.37 ***	-0.10	-1.86
Production versus service/Culture Business	0.07	0.77	.25 ***	0.13	3.06
Gender	1.17	0.38	-.13 *	-0.07	-1.52
Age (Years)	49.				
4 11.33 .16 * -0.11 -1.98					
Education (University 1, Other 0)	0.41	0.49	.12	0.05	1.12
Experience (Years)	26.11	15.12	-.18 **	0.09	1.40
Runs Firm Full Time (1/0)	0.77	0.42	.41 ***	0.21	4.66
Started Business (1/0)	0.70	0.46	-.07	-0.04	-.83
Number of Employees	0.69	0.99	.72 ***	0.52	10.13

p

Turnover Rate	
Expansion Goal	.02
Investment Adviser	.17
Finance Adviser	.72
Staff Adviser	.04
Prodcut Development Adviser	.83
ICT Advisor	.68
Marketing Advisor	.36
Agriculture versus Other Business	.06
Production versus service/Culture Business	.003
Gender	.13
Age (Years)	.05
Education (University 1, Other 0)	.26
Experience (Years)	.16
Runs Firm Full Time (1/0)	.001
Started Business (1/0)	.41

Number of Employees .001

Adj (R.sup.2) = .63, F(16, 222) = 24.28, p < .001.

* p < .05.

** p < .01.

*** p < .001.

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(1.) The category owner/not owner was excluded from the data analyses because a majority (92.4 percent) of the respondents were owners.

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INDUSTRY CODES/NAMES: BUS Business, General; BUSN Any type of business

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GEOGRAPHIC CODES/NAMES: 4EUSW Sweden

PRODUCT/INDUSTRY NAMES: 9970000 (Small Business)

EVENT CODES/NAMES: 200 Management dynamics;310 Science & research

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... have expansion goals. We also include a measure of turnover rates. Turnover rate is an **indicator** of **performance** or activity of a specific **event**. It is defined as the **business**'s annual total sales revenues. Although not a measure of profit, it reflects the
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	Type	Hits	Search Text	DBs	Time Stamp
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2	BRS	778535	interface	USPAT; US-PGPUB; EPO; JPO; DERWENT	2003/12/10 09:21
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7	BRS	321	(workflow near5 manager) and interface	USPAT; US-PGPUB; EPO; JPO; DERWENT	2003/12/10 09:34
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9	BRS	8	((workflow near5 manager) and interface) and (performance near5 indicator)	USPAT; US-PGPUB; EPO; JPO; DERWENT	2003/12/10 09:35

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2	US 20020188486 A1	20021212	41	Supply chain management	Gil, Reynaldo et al.	705/7	
3	US 20020038217 A1	20020328	12	System and method for integrated data analysis and management	Young, Alan	705/1	
4	US 6615166 B1	20030902	326	Prioritizing components of a network framework required for implementation of technology	Guheen, Michael F. et al.	703/27	703/26; 709/220; 709/223; 709/231; 709/316; 717/140
5	US 6606744 B1	20030812	285	Providing collaborative installation management in a network-based supply chain environment	Mikurak, Michael G.	717/174	705/26; 717/178
6	US 6536037 B1	20030318	329	Identification of redundancies and omissions among components of a web based architecture	Guheen, Michael F et al.	717/151	703/2; 709/231
7	US 6519571 B1	20030211	325	Dynamic customer profile management	Guheen, Michael F. et al.	705/14	
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S2	19126	PERFORMANCE (5N) INDICATOR
S3	134898	BUSINESS (5N) EVENT?
S4	1	S1 (S) S2
S5	1791954	INTERFACE
S6	0	S4 AND S5